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Student Wins Volunteer Firefighter of the Year Award from "America's Last Home Town" Wednesday, January 31, 2007

Story by Barbara Honegger, Senior Military Affairs Journalist

If there ever was a Norman Rockwell moment, Dec. 4 at the Pacific Grove, Calif., Fire Department was it.

Army Maj. Chris Muller, a Latin America foreign area officer and December Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) defense analysis graduate, was named 2006 Volunteer Firefighter of the Year by the fire chief of "America's last home town." Muller is the first military member to receive the honor since the town created it in 1966 and the only military officer serving with the station.

In less than a year, Muller has donated more than 1,200 hours on nights and weekends and remained on call for over 3,300 additional hours. In that time, he has responded to 190 emergency calls, including fire, medical, ocean rescue, hazardous conditions and auto accidents.

Balancing the military, family and community service has always been a major value in the Army officer's life.

"I'd rather graduate with a 3.8 and have done this, than graduate with a 4.0 and not have had the chance to become involved with the local community," Muller said. "We in the military are so itinerant, and with today's high on tempo it's often difficult to become involved. One of the great things about NPS is that students are afforded quality time to interact with the local community and be with our families.

"I hope receiving this award means that I've succeeded in using my military experience to give back to the fire service as an institution," Muller added, "because firefighting has made such a difference in my military career. Being a firefighter in high school before entering the Army made me a better soldier, and being a soldier has now made me a better firefighter. Also, much of what I've learned in the Pacific Grove department I'll be able to carry with me and use in my future military assignments.

"The fire service and the military are very similar," Muller explained. "A fire department is a small tactical unit, like an Army platoon, with discipline, a chain of command and team work -- so volunteering as a firefighter in high school helped me initially acclimate to the military environment at West Point. And volunteering with the Turn of River Fire Department back in my hometown of Stamford, Conn., meant I was able to come here already having my FFI (Firefighter I) certification, which is a mandatory prerequisite.

Pacific Grove Fire Chief Andrew Miller lauded Muller's exceptional service.

"On top of serving his country, Chris has chosen to use his personal time to make a life-and-death difference in real people's lives," Miller stressed.

"In addition to his thousands of donated and on-call hours, in less than a year he's trained for and received certifications from Monterey County (Calif.) as a medical first responder and from the



Occupational Safety and Health Administration for hazardous materials operations, the Department of Homeland Security for weapons of mass destruction awareness and the Federal Emergency Management Agency on its emergency incident command system.

"Chris is an outstanding firefighter, both personally and professionally, who is totally dedicated to the military, the department and his local community and is well liked by everyone in the department," Miller said. "In addition, Chris has the unique ability to come from a position of rank and yet fall in naturally as a volunteer and part of a civilian team."

A true team player, Muller insisted on sharing the credit for his award with his fellow civilian firefighters. "The Pacific Grove Fire Department is composed of a dedicated team of volunteers well integrated with a highly qualified full-time career staff," he explained. "If it had not been for my fellow volunteers and the full-time personnel, I would never have been able to succeed as a firefighter. The younger firefighters and engineers helped me refresh my fire fighting skills, and the department's officers have given me a different perspective on leadership."

As a military officer, Muller is also an informal ambassador to the local community. "I'll have a co-worker come up to me and ask, for instance, what's going on with North Korea or what do I think about U.S. immigration policy," he recalled. "Answering such questions allows me to practice articulating U.S. foreign policy, which is part of what I'll have to do when I leave NPS. Also, having me there helps my co-workers realize the Monterey Peninsula is a major military community with a major strategic impact through high-quality graduate education of both U.S. and foreign officers," he said.

Miller confirmed Muller's value as a liaison between the civilian and military communities, and his town's close working relationship with the area's military installations.

"Major Muller leveraged his vast military experience to share leadership techniques with newly promoted officers and provided policy-level feedback with the department's leadership," he said. "Sharing his military perspective helped us better understand organizational challenges and develop effective solutions."

"We work closely with both the Naval Postgraduate School and the Defense Language Institute (DLI)," Miller noted. "We were part of a major cooperative exercise a few years ago, with the scenario playing out right here in Pacific Grove."

Muller encourages all NPS officer students to find a way to volunteer in their local communities. "Other students have said they think it's neat that I work as a firefighter, and many have brought their kids to the station for a tour while I'm on shift," he recalled. "Some have even asked how they can do it, too. I encourage any student who already has FFI certification or training as an EMT (emergency medical technician) to share their skills with the community. And if you don't, there are a lot of other volunteer opportunities in the area, as well as right here at NPS."

The Pacific Grove fire chief hopes Muller will continue on as a volunteer firefighter now that he's graduated from NPS and reported to DLI.

"It's been a privilege and a pleasure to work with Chris and we want to keep him as long as we can," Miller said. "He has a great moral compass and work ethic, and a great career ahead of him. I just hope his time here has been as full for him as it has been for us."

Muller has good news for "America's last home town."

"I'll be continuing with the Pacific Grove firefighting as long as I'm at DLI," he said. "People should also know that Pacific Grove has quality emergency services. If I were buying a home in the central California coast area, I'd choose Pacific Grove for that reason."

After completing DLI's advanced Spanish language program in June, Muller will report as the Colombia desk officer for U.S. Southern Command, in Miami.

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